



# BARRIER BREAKERS

**WITH TENACITY AND CLEAR-EYED VISION, THESE MEN AND WOMEN CHARTED NEW COURSES, OPENING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THOSE WHO FOLLOWED**

*By Kim Catley*

**T**he ascension paths Rear Admiral Yvette M. Davids '89, USN, and Rear Admiral Sara A. Joyner '89, USN, followed to their wartime leadership positions were blocked when they graduated from the Naval Academy.

Women weren't allowed in combat when Joyner and Davids were commissioned. Davids' journey would see her needing special permission to be in a combat zone aboard BUNKER HILL in 1990 to commanding the vessel 20 years later. Joyner was the first female commanding officer of a fighter squadron.

It was groundbreakers like Joyner and Davids who paved the way for future generations to serve their country in combat. They followed in the trailblazing footsteps of alumni Lieutenant Commander Wesley A. Brown '49, USN (Ret.), the Academy's first Black graduate and the first class of female plebes who entered the Academy in 1976. Throughout its 175-year history, the Academy has commissioned leaders who forge new paths, break ground and smash through glass ceilings.



Then-CAPT Sara Joyner, commander of Carrier Air Wing 3, right, and LTCDR Eddy DePuy, exit an E-2C Hawkeye, assigned to the “Seahawks” of Airborne Early Warning Squadron 126, on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier HARRY S. TRUMAN in 2013.

### CRITICAL COMBAT EXPERIENCE

As chief of legislative affairs for the Navy, Joyner spends her days navigating the terrain between Congress and the Navy. Through legislation and budgetary decisions, Joyner works with her civilian partners to identify the resources—from personnel to ships and aircraft—the Navy needs to secure a successful future.

It’s a job that draws heavily on her time as a fighter pilot flying an F-18 Hornet, commanding units like the Strike Fighter Squadron 105 “Gunslingers” and serving on deployments in operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom—experiences she nearly didn’t have.

“If I were a naval aviator with a Hornet background and I hadn’t been into combat, then I would be incomplete,” she said. “I would not be somebody that could represent our community appropriately at higher levels. I would have not been fully qualified in the eyes of anybody in my community.”

The Naval Academy didn’t commission female officers into the Marines and Navy until 1980. Female aviators were banned from combat operations until 1993.

Joyner followed in her father’s footsteps to attend the Naval Academy.

She wanted to become a naval officer, and to gain experience in a rigorous and disciplined environment.

“I figured I would get a warfare specialty,” she said. “[Then I might go into] one of the specialties such as oceanography or one of the other communities that were more amenable to women having a career path.”

She didn’t consider naval aviation—Joyner wasn’t aware that women were allowed to fly—until she met a female helicopter pilot while assigned to a surface ship during her first-class year. The pilot’s passion convinced Joyner to go to flight school, where she specialized in jets.

Joyner knew jets offered few long-range career options, on top of the already limited pathways available to women. Those limitations were top of mind in the early 1990s, and Joyner was questioning whether she had much of a future in the Navy. In 1993, the Navy announced a policy change and began allowing women to train for combat roles.

Several mentors saw Joyner’s potential and encouraged her to train as a Hornet pilot. By 1996, she was flying with the VFA-147 “Argonauts.”

### ‘WASN’T LOOKING AT WHAT I COULDN’T DO’

While Joyner struggled with the limited paths available in her early years, a classmate and fellow 1989 graduate, Yvette Davids, wasn’t yet fully cognizant of the barriers women faced. Davids attended the Academy to study oceanography and joined the Navy because, she said, she “had a calling for the sea.”

In 1990, Davids began a three-year assignment to serve aboard SAN JOSE, a combat stores ship deployed in support of operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. She was in the thick of the combat zone, providing assets and logistics support.

“At that moment in time, I wasn’t looking at what I couldn’t do,” said Davids, who was named chief of staff of U.S. Southern Command in June. “You could have told me that there was a combat exclusion zone, and I would have said, ‘Really? I’m in Port Bahrain.’”

One day, Davids was summoned from SAN JOSE to spend 10 days on BUNKER HILL. She had to get special permission to board the ship, which was located in a combat zone, but the experience was eye-opening—from the brand-new cruiser, to the advanced technology, to the responsibilities of her classmates on board.



RADM Yvette Davids '89, USN, served as executive officer of the destroyer Higgins during the initial combat operations of Iraqi Freedom. In 1990, Davids needed special permission to be in a combat zone aboard BUNKER HILL.

“I remember flying back on a helicopter, and getting back on my wonderful warship, SAN JOSE. And I was infuriated at the thought that there was a limitation on what I was allowed to do. That started the fire, and opened me up that the Navy is so much larger than what I was focused on.”

Davids soon had the chance to expand. She served as executive officer of the destroyer HIGGINS during the initial combat operations of Iraqi Freedom. In 2007, she became the first Hispanic-American woman to command a Navy warship, when she took command of CURTS in support of operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

Then, 20 years after she first stepped aboard BUNKER HILL, Davids assumed command of the ship and served as air defense commander for the Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group.

“You bet I was proud of that moment,” she said. “It was pretty extraordinary.”

In those early years, Joyner and Davids were often charting a new course with few female role models to look up to, or colleagues at their sides.

Joyner’s first roommate was a civilian car salesman and a carrier onboard delivery pilot. It wasn’t until she became a department head that she roomed with a Prowler pilot and could talk about the challenges of flying.

“The young women today—now that the numbers are higher—really benefit from getting professional feedback and engagement from being in their room talking about the business with their peers,” she said.

Davids said she used to know the exact number of women on her ships, but by the time she took command of BUNKER HILL, she no longer kept track.

“I’m grateful to say that, in my career, I’ve seen some significant changes,” she said, “whether it’s the amount of women in the military, or the expectations that women at the Naval Academy have when they graduate. We see more and more incredible people in leadership positions, because they earned that right to be there. It doesn’t happen overnight, but it happens.”

### ‘A MARATHON AND A SPRINT’

Joyner and Davids’ experiences set them apart—as women in the Navy, as a combat fighter pilot and commander of a combat ship, and even being among the earliest generation of women at the Academy. Joyner said she cultivated a mental toughness, a drive to push through adversity, and determination to prove her expertise and strength at every step.

These same qualities could be attributed to nearly any graduate of the Naval Academy—but especially to a select class of barrier breakers.

Jim Cheevers, who worked as the Naval Academy Museum historian and senior curator for 50 years, witnessed many of the changes firsthand.

“I remember some guys coming to my office and unloading about the competition they were getting from the new female students and they weren’t happy about it,” he said. “I kept advising them, ‘you better get used to it, because this is the future.’”

That wave of the future didn’t just bring in a more diverse student body. Academy leadership has also broadened under Commandants of Midshipmen like General John Allen ’76, USMC (Ret.), the first Marine to serve in the role, and Rear Admiral Margaret D. Klein ’81, USN (Ret.), the first woman.

Beyond the Yard, alumni have reshaped the military, industries and academia. Cheevers’ list of notable alumni is full of firsts: Major General Charles F. Bolden ’68, USMC (Ret.), the first Black alumnus astronaut and eventual head of NASA; Commander Becky Dowling Calder ’98, USNR, the first woman to graduate from Top Gun; Lieutenant Commander Matice J. Wright ’88, USN, the first Black woman to be a naval flight officer; and Albert A. Michelson of the Class of 1873, the first American to earn the Nobel Prize for physics.

Joyner said the Academy attracts students with an innate stubbornness, while the rigorous structure of the



Gen John R. Allen 76, USMC (Ret.), right, stands in front of Gen Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, left, and Gen James F. Amos, commandant of the Marine Corps, prior to receiving a Defense Distinguished Service Medal during a retirement ceremony at the Naval Academy on 29 April 2013.

PHOTO BY SERGEANT DENGRER BAEZ

program trains them to cultivate and leverage it. This quality might be behind the generations of graduates who are unafraid when faced with the unfamiliar.

“Stubborn like a mule is a good description,” she said. “It’s a hard place to get into, and it requires focus to get through the admissions process and the requirements to get in. Staying in requires a lot of stubbornness as well. It’s a marathon and a sprint; we’re constantly sprinting to the next goalpost, but it goes for four years so you have to sustain yourself.”

Janie L. Mines ’80, who was in the first class of women at the Academy and the first Black woman to graduate, sees that same commitment and drive in today’s students, although she recognizes an opportunity to direct that energy toward new challenges.

“It almost brings tears to my eyes to see the phenomenal women that have come behind,” she said. “Whenever I go to the Academy, I see so many young people walking around with the stars on their anchor, who are very, very committed—to their professional development as well as their academic and moral development. Seeing that [our struggles] were not in vain, that such wonderful people came behind us, makes it all worthwhile.”

### **RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME**

When John Allen took over as Commandant of Midshipmen in January 2002, the U.S. was just four months removed from the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. Before his term ended, the Iraq War commenced.

The moment was, in some ways, the perfect time for Allen’s unique perspective as the first Marine Corps officer to serve as Commandant of Midshipmen.

“Traditionally,” he said, “the Marines are about winning the first battles in a conflict—getting there quickly and winning them decisively, often with the hope that we won’t need for anything to come behind us.”

As Commandant, Allen was laser-focused on equipping midshipmen with his warfighting mentality and preparing them to go to war—something the Naval Academy hadn’t experienced on this

scale since the Vietnam War. Under Allen’s leadership, every facet of the midshipmen’s education emphasized professional training, readying them for flight school, the Marine Corps, the SEALs or sub school.

He also implemented a martial arts program, directly lifted from the Marine Corps, and an elective course on human factors at war to better understand the mental state of troops. He even required students to spend a day with an emergency surgical team to witness, firsthand, the carnage of battle.

“That was really my moment,” Allen said. “I wanted everybody to understand that this wasn’t business as usual anymore. I told a lot of people, ‘You’re going to get out ahead of me and I’ll follow as quickly as I can, but I’m going to serve with you.’”

### **THE NASA ADMINISTRATOR WHO NEARLY WASN’T**

Growing up in segregated South Carolina, Charles Bolden knew he wanted to attend the Naval Academy—but his state representatives refused to nominate him because he was Black. Instead, Bolden began writing to Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, hoping to secure an appointment.

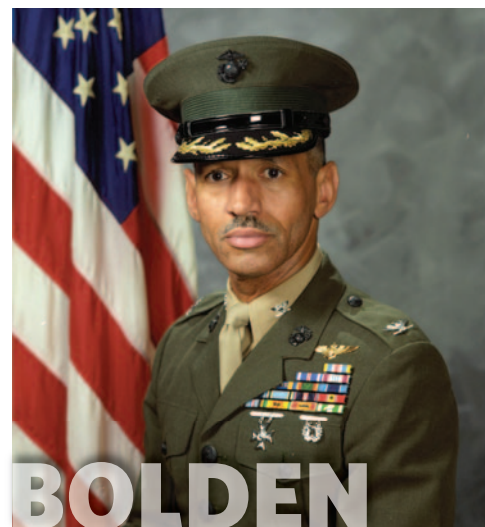
In the fall of his senior year, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, and Johnson became president. Presidential nominations were reserved for certain candidates and Bolden didn’t qualify. He saw his opportunity begin to disappear.

He wrote Johnson anyway, reminding him of his earlier request, and within weeks, a recruiter was at Bolden’s door.

“Whether the president had anything to do with it or not,” he said, “I shall never know.”

Bolden planned to serve for five years before returning to graduate school to become an engineer, but his wife convinced him to go to flight school in Pensacola instead. Then, astronaut Ronald McNair encouraged him to apply for the space program. Bolden was selected and went on to fly on four shuttle missions, logging nearly 700 hours in space.

He returned to the Academy in 1994 to serve as Deputy Commandant of



MajGen Charles F. Bolden '68, USMC (Ret.), served as deputy commandant at the Naval Academy starting in 1994. He was part of NASA’s astronaut program for 14 years (1980-1994) and was tapped by President Barack Obama to serve as NASA administrator in 2009.

Midshipmen. In 2009, six years after Bolden retired from the Marines, he received another nudge. This time, it was President Barack Obama asking him to serve as NASA Administrator.

Bolden said he was more sensitive to diversity than his predecessors, equity and inclusion efforts at NASA, and focused on encouraging more women and minority candidates into senior management roles.

“I firmly believed that the more diverse ideas we could bring to the agency, the better the agency would be,” he said. “And that turned out to be the case.”

### **THE CHANGE AGENT**

Throughout her life, Janie Mines has been a change agent. That was the case at the Naval Academy, where Mines was a member of the first class of women.

“They were trying to figure out how to bring us in and accommodate our needs, but there were many at the Academy who resisted the presence of women,” Mines said. “Those women were some of the bravest individuals I’ve ever met. I have a lot of respect for all my classmates, but if I ever went to war, just give me those other 54 women and we could storm the beach.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF JANIE MINES '80

Janie Mines '80 met with midshipmen during a book signing at the Midshipmen Store in 2019.

But being part of that class wasn't Mines' only role as a change agent—she was also the only Black woman to be admitted. When a representative from the Academy contacted her to inform her, she said she recognized her responsibility, and knew that her faith had prepared her for it.

She said she “naively” accepted her role as a trailblazer. She said she didn't anticipate the degree of resistance she would face in Annapolis. However, she understood it. The phone call informing her she would be the only Black woman set the tone, she said.

“It wasn't a pleasant phone call,” Mines said. “It almost sounded like a dare.”

Mines, who had offers to attend Ivy League schools, saw the Academy as an opportunity to serve her country, to learn at an excellent academic institution, and to grow at a phenomenal rate. She said she leaned on her faith to persevere through unique physical and psychological challenges.

She said she was told she was a threat to national security, and she was undermining the values and goals of the Academy by her “mere presence.” Mines said she shared the goals and visions of her classmates.

“I had to demonstrate against strong odds that I was capable of doing all those things, that I was capable of leading in a diverse environment, that I could go out in the fleet and do something other than get good white men killed,” Mines said.

“That's what I was told. But I can lead everybody no matter what their color and do it to the benefit of the Navy, our overall mission and the benefit of the people that I served with.”

That experience served her well. Time after time, the Navy sent her to duty stations with significant behavioral issues, and Mines was known for ability to work with the team to turn the environment around. Later, at Procter & Gamble, she was sent to a chemical processing plant where she was the first Black woman in a supervisory role.

“We had difficult conversations, and we worked through it,” she said. “We became one of the highest productivity plants in the entire Procter & Gamble system.”

“I think we all have different strengths, and being a change agent is a significant aspect of who I am.”

**POWERFUL, RESILIENT WOMEN**

Commander Elizabeth Anne (Belzer) Rowe '80, USN (Ret.), can still remember feeling intimidated and overwhelmed on her first day at the Academy, where she was the first woman to graduate based on class rank. But, she said, it would have taken a crowbar to remove her. That drive and determination served Rowe well as

she navigated the integration of women at the Academy.

“If you give me rules and steps and organization, I'm all about it,” she said. “The great thing about the Naval Academy was that I knew exactly what I needed to do. So, I put my nose to the grindstone, kept my head down, and just worked.”

Rowe said her experience came with a number of positives, too—from a supportive first lieutenant and professors, to encouraging words from the superintendent, to being the first female Trident Scholar.

She also developed a persona that established her authority as an officer in the Navy. After Rowe graduated, she served for three years on SAMUEL GOMPERS before attending graduate school at MIT. She spent most of her career stationed in Norfolk, VA.

But, she said, her biggest accomplishment is her three daughters.

“Here I am, 40 years later, the first woman graduate—what did I do with it?” she said. “What I did was raise three powerful girls. I raised three women that I think will be independent, hardworking and resilient, and that will go into the world.” ⚓



PHOTO COURTESY OF CDR ELIZABETH BELZER ROWE '80, USN (RET.)

CDR Elizabeth (Belzer) Rowe '80, USN (Ret.), with her daughters. From left to right: Anne, Rebecca, Elizabeth and Sarah.